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HERFORD'S "PHARISAISM"

Pharisaism: Its Aim and Method. By R. TRAVERS HERFORD,
B. A. London and New York: WILLIAMS & NORGATE,
G. P. PUTNAM & SONS, 1912. pp. 340.

MR. Herford has written a striking and an original book, original not so much in its content as in its outlook. He is already known to theological students by a scholarly study on "Christianity in Talmud and Midrash." But in this book he has handled a much more difficult subject, and taken up a much bolder standpoint. His aim, in his own words, has been—

"to present and make clear the Pharisaic conception of religion, the point of view from which they regarded it and the methods by which they dealt with it. I have not sought to write a panegyric on them, but, so far as may be possible for one who is not a Jew, to present their case from their own standpoint, and not, as is so often done, as a mere foil to the Christian religion."

Such a book was long overdue, but misrepresentation of the Pharisees had become such a commonplace among Christian theologians, whether in other respects of the Liberal or the Conservative school, that it seemed beyond hope that the critical spirit, not to say the spirit of justice, would ever be applied to the New Testament record of the sect. Mr. Herford has made the attempt to judge Pharisaism without preconceived prejudices and with sympathy; and it may be said at once that he has been in the main strikingly successful. His Rabbinical learning is sufficient, and he carries it easily; and he has the quality of imagination which enables him to appreciate other points of view than his own. Though his chapters bear an impress of having been delivered as oral lectures separately, the writing is always clear and there is little repetition.

Mr. Herford starts with a historical sketch in which he traces the development of Judaism as the religion of the Torah "which found expression in the intention of fulfilling as a personal duty the commands of God set forth in the Scriptures, and especially in the Pentateuch." He recognizes that the service of God through the law was to the individual Jew not an irksome task imposed on him by external authority, but a willing and glad devotion of himself and all his powers to God. The effect of the Maccabean struggle was to renew the hold of the Jewish people upon the religion of the Torah, and it was the Pharisees who kept that religion as a living principle, capable of being adapted, and needing to be adapted, to fresh developments of religious life. And it was the Pharisee again who, when the Temple was destroyed and the nation dispersed, preserved the religion of the Torah and the tradition in which its meaning and content were set forth in growing fullness. In his second chapter the writer deals with "The Theory of Torah," and in the first place disposes of the deep-rooted fallacy by which Torah is taken to connote simply Law in its sense of binding prescription. On lines which are familiar to Jewish interpreters, but which are a welcome innovation in Christian theology, he shows how Ezra and the Scribes, by making the Torah the seat of authority in religion, deepened the spiritual life of the ordinary Jew.

"The Torah," he says, "made the religion of Israel personal and individual to a far greater degree than it had been before, and it did so by conveying to the individual Jew not merely the legal precept but the prophetic fervour, the joy of the inspiration of personal communion with God as well as the high privilege of serving Him. The introduction of the Torah was not the signal for a decline in the national religious life, but the beginning of a new and strenuous advance; and whereas, before, the prophets had towered high above the mass of the people, who had remained at a comparatively low level of spiritual attainment, henceforth there is a great development of the spiritual nature of the ordinary people,

the individual Jew. There were no more prophets, because there was no further need of any prophets."

In support of this estimate of the spiritual worth of Torah religion, Mr. Herford adduces the development of the synagogue, the first attempt at public worship without a cult, and the growth and completion of the Book of Psalms in the time of the Scribes. But the Halakah in its entirety, he maintains, manifests the same spiritual idea. He takes the extreme instances of minute regulation in the Mishnah, which have been the happy hunting-ground of Christian theologians and Jewish reformers,—such for example as the rules for dealing with an egg laid upon the sabbath—and traces how even in them the Pharisee would feel the teaching of the divine will, without concern for the smallness of the occasion in regard to which he was fulfilling that will. "It is easy to make Pharisaism appear ridiculous, a mere extravagance of painstaking formalism. But that is only possible to those who judge it by a standpoint which its adherents never recognised."

In the next two chapters of the book, the author treads more delicate ground. He examines the relations of Jesus and Paul to Pharisaism, and without trying in the least to explain away their hostility, he contrives to explain it. He brings a critical spirit to bear not only on the text but on the spirit of the Gospels in their treatment of Judaism. In regard to fundamental beliefs there was no disagreement between Jesus and the Pharisees, and many of his phrases, the watchwords of his spiritual religion, were taken by him from his Pharisaic environment. What then was the reason of the hostility between them? Mr. Herford finds it in the claim to personal authority which Jesus set up as the basis of religion. The famous phrase in the Gospel (Matthew 7, 29), "he taught as one having authority and not as their Scribes," gives the keynote of his revolution. For the Pharisees, the Torah was the basis of the religious life, the supreme revelation of God to man. But Jesus, while claiming to fulfil the Torah, was in fact setting up a new sanction of personal conviction. 'Ahad Haam' has recently pointed out that the essential religious characteristic of Judaism is that "it cannot accept with religious enthusiasm as the word of God the utterance of a man who speaks in his own

name—not "Thus saith the Lord," but "I say unto you." ("Judaism and the Gospels," *The Jewish Review*, I, 200). And Mr. Herford expresses the same idea, when he points to the fundamental incompatibility between the religion of Torah and the religion of the individual soul. "Christianity in all its forms is a religion founded on personality, one in which the central feature is a Person. And Judaism, at all events since the days of the Pharisees, is a religion in which the central feature is not a person, at all events not a human person, but the Torah." Jesus, therefore, could not understand the Pharisees; and when he calls them 'hypocrites,' that is merely the expression of irreconcilable opposition between his and their religion. It seems obvious, but few Christian commentators have pointed it out, that the justice of the implied charge is not established by the fact that the charge is made, and that recrimination is not argument. The Pharisees have been attacked, even by a Jewish commentator of the Gospels, for their views about divorce and upbraided in no measured terms. But Mr. Herford again rises above the common prejudice, and shows the injustice of the attack.

"The controversy was strictly not about divorce in itself but about the attitude of the Torah towards divorce. Jesus condemned divorce... But the Pharisees also condemned divorce. They could not abolish it, but they sought to restrict what had been the immemorial freedom of the husband to put away his wife at his pleasure. If Hillel and Akiba had seen their way to interpret the Torah in accordance with their own ethical judgment, they would certainly have done so. But in face of the fact that the Torah, the written Torah, expressly allowed divorce, not even Hillel and Akiba could establish the contrary view."

Paul was even more incapable than Jesus of appreciating the true meaning of Pharisaism. He says, it is true, that he was a Pharisee of the Pharisees—so, by the way, did Josephus, whose description of Pharisaism would hardly be accepted as authoritative—but he had abandoned the Jewish standpoint, and wrote years after he had been converted to a different religion; and "a con-

vert seldom takes the same view of the religion he has left as is taken by those who remain in it." Stirred himself by a new faith, and impatient at the slow progress of the Jewish mission to the Gentiles, he believed with an intense and absorbing passion that harmony with God could be obtained only through faith in Jesus, and that it was sought in vain under the law. To such a man those who upheld the Torah as the way of righteousness were unintelligible. But that does not prove that they were perverse. His theory was valid for himself, but it was not valid for the Jew; and arguing from his premises he only described an unreal Judaism, such as it doubtless ought to have been if his premises had been true, but such as in fact and experience it certainly was not. His presentation of Judaism is "at its best a distortion, and at its worst a fiction." Paul in fact introduced into his account of Pharisaism the *odium theologicum* which has remained in the Church ever since.

On one point Mr. Herford seems to do a little injustice to the Pharisees. He speaks of their particularism, which is contrasted with the universalism of Paul's Gospel. Universalist ideas, he thinks, were but seldom touched upon in their ordinary thought and debate. "Moreover the Torah itself, which was to them so all-important, was given only to Israel and would serve only them as a means of salvation." He repeats the same idea with greater emphasis in his conclusion when he says that the religion of the Torah could not free itself from Particularism, and though it could and did cherish a vision of Universalism, the vision was for the far future and only floated fitfully before the gaze of the Pharisee. Has the writer not here lost that historical perspective which has hitherto guided him? It is true that the Talmud contains some passages of a particularist character—in view of the circumstances in which it was compiled that was inevitable—but it contains also many passages which breathe a generous universalism, and it is full of ideas about the Messianic Kingdom which are but an expression of the belief in the ultimate acceptance of the law of righteousness by all mankind. So far from the Torah being regarded as exclusively reserved for Israel, it is stated by the Rabbis with several variations that it was given to Israel for all

the nations, that it was revealed in seventy different languages, that Israel was dispersed so that he might teach the Torah to the peoples (*Pesaḥim* 87*b*, *Megillah* 29*a*). The particularist sentiments which Mr. Herford cites were evoked by the bitter experience of the second, third, and fourth centuries, when the Rabbis first saw the breaking away of the Christian heresy from the Torah, and then felt the cruelty of the triumphant Christian Church towards those who followed the Torah.

The last two chapters of the book deal with 'Pharisaic Theology' and 'Pharisaism as a Spiritual Religion,' and for a great part they show the same spirit of sympathetic appreciation as marks the rest. Though the author throughout refrains from mentioning his sources, we feel that Dr. Schechter's "Aspects of Rabbinic Theology" has been carefully studied and assimilated by him. He reproduces many of the Rabbinical sayings about the nearness of God, about reward and punishment, and merit, which the Jewish scholar has collected to show the inner religion of the Jewish teachers; and he emphasizes also the fundamental fact which the Jewish scholar has driven home that Pharisaism has no system of doctrinal theology. "Haggadah," he says, "is interpretation of Scripture in all directions except that of precept"; and he points out the fallaciousness of the position of a Weber who tries to extract an exact doctrine from the medley of Pharisaic teachings, generally, as one would expect, an unfavorable doctrine.

The last chapter of this book, however, seems to us the least satisfactory, and that because the writer, in forming his general conclusions, takes too narrow a field for his vision. As illustrations of the spiritual character of Pharisaism he chooses some of the Psalms, e. g. Ps. 103 and Ps. 119, which he assumes to be of late origin, a few of the oldest prayers from the Hebrew liturgy, and a few of the prayers in the Talmud ascribed to famous Rabbis. Of the last he says, "there is nothing very sublime about them, none of the eloquence of rapture. But neither is there any of the vainglorious boasting supposed to be characteristic of the Pharisee." This is discriminating appreciation; but more questionable is his judgment of the whole; that—

"to one accustomed to the New Testament there is a certain flatness about the Rabbinical literature; a want of the sublime and still more of the beauty of holiness, the fervour of faith, the personal consecration which marks the New Testament. There is nothing in all the Rabbinical literature at all like the rapt utterances in I. Corinthians xii."

Now it may be that parts of the New Testament have a different 'feel,' as the writer puts it, from the snippets of the Pharisaic liturgy which he has brought together in this book. But the comparison is surely unfair. If he would compare the spiritual product of Pharisaism with the spiritual product of Christianity, it is fallacious to choose out a few scattered passages from the Talmud and Midrash, which are not in any sense collections of devotional literature, and set them against the intense religious utterances of the Christian Bible. If, however, he had considered the book of Psalms as a whole, or if he had appraised the devotional work of a Bahya, or Gabirol, which, though later in date than the Talmudic prayers, are equally the expression of Pharisaism as a spiritual religion,—if he had treated them in the same spirit as he has appraised the early fragments of Pharisaic doctrine about Torah, he would hardly have denied to Pharisaic Judaism religious ecstasy, the fervor of faith, and the beauty of holiness. Mr. Herford appears to be here a little too theoretical and, so to say, external, to lack that spirit of sympathy which illuminates his treatment of the New Testament controversies, and to suffer from an inadequate knowledge of Jewish thought outside the Talmud. He brings his 'Theory of the Torah' as the touchstone of the Pharisaic literature, and tries to make it apply to the whole; but to do so he leaves out the whole mystical development of Judaism as though it did not exist. Yet it is fundamental to the Jewish and the Pharisaic spirit that it is at once mystic and legal. The conception of the Law as the guide of human life has from the time of Ezekiel been transfigured in the greatest Jewish minds by the mystic imagination. Mr. Herford's appreciation of Pharisaism is incomplete, because he neglects altogether this aspect of it.

But it were ungracious to end up a review of this stimulating book with a cavil. The outstanding merit remains that a Christian theologian has sincerely endeavored to expound what Pharisaism meant to those "who held it as their religion, who lived by it and died by it"; and has striven to abandon the habit of regarding Rabbinical Judaism as a means of exalting Christianity. Mr. Herford has not only made a successful endeavor, he has given us what is for the most part a striking achievement, and we hope that some day he will supplement this brief study with a completer appreciation of Judaism.

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